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ABSTRACT

In the past 2 decades women have begun to make inroads into the male-dominated area of public school administration. Advancement for women was hindered by male-based approaches to teaching and preparation of school administrators. Meanwhile, women in other professions were making progress and forming support networks. One such group, the Northeast Coalition of Educational Leaders (NECEL), was formed in 1975 to promote women in educational leadership positions. NECEL later created "The Future Directions Project," which outlined a 10-year plan for the organization and how it could promote women school administrators. Members determined through the project that unlike many men, women approach the professional world with the core values used in their personal lives. Women interpret the world differently than men through a different category of experiences, and feminist leadership reflects this view. Collaboration, caring, courage, intuition, and vision were identified as characteristics women bring to educational leadership positions. However, women can learn from the experiences of men. Preparation programs, traditionally male-based, should begin teaching the qualities women bring to school administration. (Contains 15 references.) (JPT)

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OUT OF WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE: SCHOOL LEADERSHIP FOR WOMEN AND MEN

by

Helen B. Regan and Gwen H. Brooks

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Part 1

We are about to relate the outline of a journey to new understanding about women as educational leaders. We believe both the journey itself as well as its destinations have value for others interested in learning more about school leadership in general, and women's work as educational leaders in particular. As you listen to us, we ask that you keep that assertion in mind and that you evaluate it. We plan to allow ample time for discussion, questions and comment, and in that period we would like to know if you agree that either or both parts of our message have value. Also, we would like to know, in your opinion, if others, women and men alike, might gain new knowledge about effective school leadership if they were acquainted with the concepts in this paper a priori as part of their preparation to become school leaders.

Our sense of the ways women lead has gradually evolved as we have practiced our leadership as public school administrators and have processed our thoughts about our experiences with women working in

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similar roles. The catalyst for setting these ideas before a public audience grew out of our experiences as members of the governing board of the New England Coalition of Educational Leaders. For those of you who are not familiar with this organization, let me give you a very brief history of its beginnings.

It has been less than two decades, as many of you are aware, that women have begun to make inroads into the male-dominated career of public school administration. When women began to seriously consider leadership positions at every level of the school hierarchy, we found most doors closed and little if any support in our job searches. Our preparation for administrative roles was dominated by male faculties at the colleges and universities where we studied and we were taught male-based approaches toward administering schools. At that time we were clueless to the idea that indeed there might be a different, even better way to do it! Women who did gain entry into school administration found themselves stuck in entry level positions, with little opportunity or encouragement to move up the ladder.

Around the country at that time, business and professional women were forming networks to support, encourage and mentor other women. At about this time, a small group of women began meeting in Boston,

Massachusetts to discuss issues facing them in their job searches or their administrative positions. Out of these meetings, the New England Coalition of Educational Leaders was born in 1975. The women who gathered in Boston have seen their vision come to fruition. The New England Coalition has become the Northeast Coalition of Educational Leaders (NECEL), embracing over 500 women from Maine to Pennsylvania with a stated mission of promoting women into educational leadership positions.

Our study, however, is not about the struggles women have had, and in many cases continue to have, in working in educational administration. Though these struggles are very much integrated into the whole of our experiences, our focus is on new understandings of the female experience in administering schools.

The journey that has led us to understanding and naming the attributes which make feminist leadership unique, began through the work of the NECEL governing board and later its affiliate members who articulated and named these attributes through a collaborative process stretching over a period of several years. It is not surprising that this effort was a collaborative one, since this is one of the attributes we find that women bring to the leadership process.

As NECEL passed its 10th birthday, we found our organizational vision changing. It became necessary to begin to articulate future goals and directions, to move from the concrete to the abstract, to reconceive the vision. Led by Peggy McIntosh from the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, the 15 members of the 1986-87 governing board of NECEL embarked on a year-long series of seminars designed to map out a ten-year plan for the future direction of the organization; this became known as The Future Directions Project. What emerged from that project was a clearer sense of purpose for the organization, and a gift we had not imagined; the gift of understanding school leadership from a feminist perspective. When we began our seminars, we were looking for a product, a plan which would take us along a path which would meet the changing needs of a growing organization. What gradually emerged was process rather than product, a process to define our leadership as well as a process to nurture and develop the organization.

During our seminars, our discussions led us in many directions. Over those months as the stories of our professional experiences were unfolding, we found they were becoming interwoven with the stories of our personal lives and as they unfolded, a very powerful message began to reveal itself: Our approaches to our jobs could not be separated from the

core values around which we lived our personal lives. We struggled with identifying what it was that made the way we defined our roles as school leaders and the ways in which we carried out those roles, different from those of our male colleagues. Emphatically, they were not quantitative differences because we all knew we were working as hard, harder in many cases, than the men with whom we worked. Gradually came the awareness that if we were to continue to discuss women's leadership, we had to name what it was that we were expressing in a variety of ways, but which was coming from a common core of feelings and experiences. We have come to realize that women interpret the world through quite different lenses than men; affected by generations of women's experiences which even the most feminist of men cannot experience or interpret. Feminist leadership reflects feminine experience.

After almost a year, the Future Directions Seminar took on new meaning and vitality as we named and gave definition to the attributes we had been struggling to identify through discussion and personal stories. At last we had a foundation from which we could speak as one voice about feminist leadership to our membership and to the educational community at large. The attributes we named are collaboration, caring, courage, intuition and vision.

Our first attempt to put our new knowledge to use involved requests to one another to write about our careers using the five attributes as categories of interpretation. That got us nowhere. Only two of us are in academics now with both the flexibility and expectation that we write as part of our jobs. The rest of us continue in line jobs where the premium is on action, not reflection. By 1991, we knew that we needed another vehicle by which to transport our understanding to others. So we two academics decided to create an environment where reflection was possible. We invited our group to a two day Writer's Conference where actually we talked about our careers from the perspective of feminist school leadership rather than write about them.

Here, I need to tell you still another story as it clearly reflects the way in which feminist leaders go about the business of leading. This vignette struck me as I was taking a break from my computer to fold the clothes from my dryer a few weeks ago. I was thinking about our book and this paper and remembering how Helen and I finally hit upon a Writer's Conference. It was early fall last year and I had just attended a professional meeting and had driven to Helen's house, fifty miles away. When I arrived, she was folding clothes, daughter Katy and her friend were chasing Katy's new chocolate lab puppy around the house, husband Dick

was outside raking the yard. In the next two hours, Helen finished folding clothes, she made lunch and I ate it, then we sat and talked for a couple of hours (counting the interruptions), about whether we should abandon our plans for a book or try something new. Finally, and with great feelings of exhilaration, we hit on a plan for a Writer's Conference. Two months later, we were at a country inn with a group of 7 participants, conversing, writing and taping a wealth and richness of material some of which you will hear today, much of which we intend to appear in our future work. The women to whom we refer in our paper were all members of the original Future Directions Project and/or the Writer's Conference. Their names appear at the end of this paper.

In their book, The Feminization of America, Elinor Lenz and Barbara Myerhoff make the point that, "It is not until aspects of a culture have been made conscious that they may be examined and possibly revised." Beginning in the Future Directions Seminar and extending through the Writer's Conference, we have examined one aspect of the culture; feminist leadership in education. As Cindy, one of the members of our group said, "It seems to me the place to move in the future is to talk about behaviors for all of us regardless of whether we were born male or female...." We agree with Cindy, but we know that, although naming or attaching labels is

not altogether satisfactory, it provides us with a structure for building a bridge from what is to what can be. We continue to struggle with naming as Vicky, another of our members, pointed out, ".... we have to be careful that the characteristics that come to mind when we use certain words and labels, might not be all that comes to mind to the world." We are mindful of this as we bring this to you today. We make no apologies, only to say that our work is in process and reflects our readings, our discussions with our colleagues, and our intuition - a term that is decidedly feminine in connotation and which you will note in a few moments is one of the attributes of feminist leadership.

The first attribute we have named is COLLABORATION: We define collaboration as the ability to work in a group eliciting and offering support to each other member, creating a synergistic environment for everyone. Lenz and Myerhoff in The Feminization of America state, "Cooperativeness as women have practiced it through the ages, is one of women's hidden sources of power." This quality comes up over and over as we listen to the stories women tell of their experiences. They reach out to other people, ask for help, include people in, collaborating to get the job done. A significant side-product that often results from this approach is the development of new leadership and greater self-esteem for those

included in. I recently read about the principal of a school in Indianapolis, a school that has been turned around from a violent and unsafe place for students to an environment fostering team spirit and learning. The principal, Charlotte Greenwood, first reached out to the mothers of her students, inviting them in to visit, follow their children's schedules, demonstrating to their kids that they cared about them and what they were doing. To one startled mother, Charlotte said, "I need your help," and prevailed upon her to become the president of the non-functioning PTA. This mother breathed new life into the PTA. In addition, she asked her husband to help out at a school talent show after several incidents of rowdy behavior at similar school functions. She bought him a T-shirt on which she had imprinted "Security Dad." This made such an impact that eventually many dads decided to become Security Dads who help out at school functions, initially to insure their children's safety, later because they enjoyed the students and the role they were playing in the life of the school. The school still struggles with a poor public image, but it is improving thanks to a principal who had the courage to ask for help.

This is the web of inclusion that Sally Helgesen describes in her book, The Female Advantage: Women's Ways of Leadership, a book about women leaders in business and industry. Women in educational leadership

positions respond to their roles in the same ways, creating collaborative experiences for their staffs and for the students in their care. As Susan, a member of our study said, "I think something women do is to give permission to other people to behave differently."

The second attribute, CARING, we define as the development of an affinity for the world and the people in it; translating moral commitment to action. Carol Gilligan, in her book In a Different Voice, and Mary Belenky and her associates in their book Women's Way of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind, identify the themes of care and connection as central to women's psychological development and learning. Feminist leadership reflects care and concern for colleagues, male and female, and is central to their conduct of their schools. Summing up some of our thoughts after the first day of our Writer's Conference, Susan said, "[an essential piece] of all of this is the development of relationships and that the relationships define the conditions... what we've been talking about, helping others, doing unto others, it all had to do with interactions and how we can look at helping people develop relationships and support them and give them the environment they need to go forward... trust relationships that are built on the values of caring, support, those kinds of things."

The attribute of COURAGE, the capacity to move ahead into the unknown, testing new ideas in the world of practice is an attribute that we find in most women embarking on careers previously associated with men. The people at the top of the pyramid have almost always been males. In one of our group discussions, Helen emphasized that there is a separation of the private and public spheres. The public sphere is a male sphere, structured by male rules that we had to figure out how to play. One woman made the point that we had to play by the rules in order to get into the group to begin with. We came to consensus: It took courage to figure out the rules and play by them as long as they were not in conflict with our core values, then we could go on to change the rules guided by those core values. When the obstacles to making change are immovable, however, and/or in conflict with their values, women tend to move on, with or without another job to take its place. Several comments by women in the group made statements such as, "I couldn't stay there anymore and continue to be healthy. That battle couldn't be won... I don't know that it felt so courageous in the beginning. It did feel like something I wanted to win." Another, a superintendent who had recently changed positions, "In my last job I could have stayed there forever... good system, well-paid, but not a satisfier. The value system I just found so

appalling to my own personal core of value that [in searching for a new position], I was extremely careful.. as to the kind of district I would look at ... the fit of the community had to be closer to my personal beliefs."

The fourth attribute is INTUITION, defined as the ability to give equal weight to experience and abstraction, mind and heart.

Intuition is a word that we as women, particularly professional women, have hesitated to use because for so long it was a "female thing," therefore was given little credibility. There's nothing magical about intuition. It is a natural mental ability, strongly associated with experience. As we build on our experiences, we place greater trust in our intuition. Susan said, "I think an important piece for women leaders is to articulate what they do and what they feel, what they believe and maybe some of that comes from articulating our intuition... we may know things at a gut level, [but], unless we're articulating them they are not going to get passed on."

The last attribute is VISION which is the ability to formulate and express original ideas, persuading others to consider the options in new and different ways.

In "Toward Reconceiving Women and Leadership," a collection of essays generated from the NECEL Future Directions project, Bethene

LeMahieu wrote about her experience creating a school of the future, a school that was inclusive, where "teachers believed in students and confirmed them as knowers -- as craftspersons, people who could do many things well." She says that she was propelled by inner fire -- it was a time when she studied, reflected upon, practiced, and talked about developing potential in a voice marked with enthusiasm, emotion, passion, and a sense of optimism and hope." This is vision.

Gender is a category of experience. The feminist leadership attributes we have named reflect feminine experience. They emerge from a core set of values which propel them into action. Articulating and naming them, has brought them to consciousness. During our conference last year, Carol summarized the process which has taken us on this journey. She said she has adopted a phrase from the program, "Reading Recovery." The phrase is, "wandering around the known," a term used in the program for lst graders when the teacher is wandering around what is known by the child and trying to link it up with their set of experiences so their growth is revealed. That is what our journey has been, "wandering around the known." When we began, we didn't know. Now we know -- our feminine experiences are linked to our behavior as feminist leaders, but the journey has only begun.

Part II

During our planning for this paper, Gwen was reminded of Robert Frost's poem The Road Not Taken. She prompted me to think that, should we write a poem about roads, it would be entitled, the Road Taken, but Not Recognized. She has briefly described the initial phases of our journey on the road taken, but not recognized, and in vivid detail, she has described our first waystation.

My task is both a retrospective, and prospective one - to describe features of the journey that we now recognize, looking backwards, and to foreshadow future waystations. The journey is still underway, and we now expect it to be never-ending. However, we are not as blind as we once were to the landscape around us, and so we grasp new understanding more quickly and with greater clarity, as we encounter new features along the way. So I will recount aspects of the journey from its beginnings in the mid-seventies through the Writers' Conference of ten months ago.

The foundational assumption of this project is that gender is a category of experience. That means that women and men experience and interpret the world differently as a function of their different genders. Gender is not the only category of experience, of course. Race and class are two other important ones in twentieth century United States. The interpretation by any one individual of the world is a complex blend of all relevant categories for that individual. However, in this project, we have focused only on gender.

As Gwen has told you, the formation of NECEL was the catalyst for the start of our journey, although at that time we were embarked

on the road not recognized. For the first ten years or so, NECEL focused on figuring out the rules of being a school leader. This meant we formed networks because we had heard that's what the old boys do, we dressed for success, we learned and practiced the games our mothers never taught us, and generally we tried to mimic the behavior of the men leaders around us. We knew that the world of school leadership was organized hierarchically, and we were determined to move up the hierarchy. Many of us did. Just as we did not know at this point that gender is a category of experience, so too we did not know that we were mimicking the rules of the role as we found them. One does not question the given until one sees that it has been given.

If one accepts gender as a category of experience, then one must also accept that women and men may experience and interpret the role of school leadership differently. Our central thesis is exactly that, and hence the main title of our paper: Out of Women's Experience. Slowly and with great difficulty over a period of about seventeen years, a group of about a dozen NECEL members have come to name and value characteristic attributes of women's practice of school leadership. We have begun to use these attributes as lenses through which to analyze our practice, and we have found that doing so brings clarity and coherence to our work.

Accepting that gender is a category of experience does NOT mean that learning arising from the experiences of the other gender is inaccessible. If this were true, we would be in the ultimate state of existential alienation. Rather, we believe each gender can learn from the experiences of the other IF the experiences of the other are

articulated and disseminated widely. In fact, such a process is what most education is about, namely articulating and disseminating the learning arising from male experience and analysis. The body of knowledge which we learned in our graduate school educations in school administration, and which you learned too, derives essentially and exclusively from male-based experience because the overall experience and knowledge of women, as a gender, is devalued and hidden in our culture, and because, in particular, women have been excluded from positions of school leadership so their experience is not available as a source of knowledge.

You undoubtedly have realized that the early years of NECEL were devoted to perpetrating this state of affairs. Our first attempts at becoming school leaders involved us in learning and trying to apply male based knowledge about effective school leadership. We simply didn't know there was any other way to be, and we didn't know that we didn't know. And the success many of us had in learning and applying male-based knowledge about school leadership was not in and of itself a bad thing. After all, about half the knowledge in the world is constructed out of male experience, and all people, men and women, should learn this knowledge, experiment with it in the role of leader, and become knowledgeable critics of it.

This idea leads us to the sub-title of our paper ---: School Leadership for Women and Men. The problem does not lie in women learning about school leadership through the perspective of men's experience, but rather in being told and believing THAT THAT'S ALL THE KNOWLEDGE THERE IS. How false, how immoral, and what a loss

to everyone, women and men alike. Just as we believe that all people, women and men, can learn from the experience and interpretation of experience of men, so too we believe that all people, women and men, can learn from the experience of women. Here our project becomes part of the larger feminist project underway in the wider society, valuing, articulating, recovering, and disseminating the experience and knowledge of women so that it becomes a resource for all, not only in the relatively narrow field of school leadership, but in all aspects of the human condition. Our specific contribution is constructing knowledge about feminist school leadership, but in so doing we share in the work of feminist scholars in all fields.

In the mid-eighties, I had the great, good fortune of hearing Peggy McIntosh, of the Center for Research on Women at Wellesley College, describe a metaphor of culture which led to the first moment of new understanding about the role of women as school leaders. McIntosh argues that our culture can be conceptualized as a pyramid with a fault line running through the middle (Overhead here). Above the fault is the either/or world of the corporation, the military, the church, the school. Life is organized hierarchically in the shape of a pyramid narrowing at the top so that my success in moving up necessitates your failure. There is room for only a few at the top. Power, prestige and money are directly related to position. The upper reaches of the pyramid are inhabited primarily by white males, and their interpretation of the world is represented by them as the only interpretation possible. They are creators and guardians of Truth.

However, below the fault is a whole other world, invisible and unknown to the inhabitors of the mid-and upper reaches of the pyramid. Below the fault is the both/and world of collaboration. Here crops are planted cyclically, diapers are changed, community is built, laundry is done. This is the world primarily of women and people of color. Inhabitants of this world are systematically taught that the world above the fault is the real world, that their experience is meaningless, without value, unworthy of analysis or dissemination to others.

This metaphor brought us understanding because it was the first language which seemed connected to our growing awareness that the way we as women went about our work as school leaders didn't exactly follow the male model. This metaphor assuaged a slight sense of guilt we had, but of which we did not yet speak, even to one another, that perhaps we weren't doing these jobs exactly as we had been taught. The metaphor allowed us to speculate that maybe there wasn't anything wrong with us, but rather we were bringing some of our below the fault qualities of care and collaboration to our work as school leaders, and this was GOOD.

The NECEL Board hired Peggy McIntosh as a consultant who met with us over a period of a year. With her encouragement, and gentle, but persistent prodding, we began to speak with our own voices for the first time. It is hard to communicate the exhilaration we felt as we named our experience, and through naming came to see that our experience had value. As Gwen has told you, it took another year or two for one of us, Cynthia Dubea, to codify our new understanding so that we felt like we had built a firm structure that

could withstand scrutiny and rigorous application. Cindy identified five attributes as characteristic of practice of feminist school leadership. They are caring, intuition, collaboration, vision, and courage. I simply restate them here, leaving intact the lovely images of these attributes which I hope Gwen's illustrations have spawned in your minds. My purpose is to describe the consequences of our courageous act of naming.

By analyzing women's experience, we had created new knowledge. This is a bold claim, of course, which must be verified by others beyond our group - people such as yourselves. At the very least, however, these five attributes fit our experiences. All of us accept them as names for things we do consciously and continuously, and which most, but not all, of the men around us do not do to the same degree. They are certainly not qualities which we were taught formally in our educations, but we believe they are qualities which SHOULD BE TAUGHT to all aspiring school leaders, women and men alike. Men may have more difficulty putting them into practice because they are rooted in life below the fault where very few men tread. However, that's not to say they cannot learn them, and thus traverse the faultline as successful women school leaders have always done, although in the opposite direction.

As my understanding of the value of women's experience grew, I searched actively for a new metaphor which would convey a reconfigured world in which the experiences of each gender would be equally valued. I am a chemist by training and so it's not surprising that I landed on a natural shape, the double helix. **(Overhead)**

The double helix is the molecule of life; it is the shape of DNA, the molecule encoding our genetic information. Each separate strand of the double helix, winding around and around, is a special sequence of amino acids which determines the form of life. The strands are linked together by bridges of hydrogen bonds. In addition to literally shaping our lives, the double helix seems to describe our lives figuratively as well.

The double helix makes it clear that both genders need to move back and forth from the conceptualization of the world primarily associated with their gender to that associated with the other, and that both knowledge and praxis are incomplete if articulated through the perspective of one gender only.

At this stage, we finally articulated our foundational assumption: gender is a category of experience. Women experience the world in a particular way, interpret it through a lens which is a function of gender, and that experience thus analyzed is valuable to everyone. We noticed that much that was being written validated our interpretation of the feminist attributes of school leadership, be it Helgeson in The Female Advantage, or Belenky et al in Women's Ways of Knowing, or Gilligan in In a Different Voice. Gwen has indicated some of the connections we see, and our bibliography directs you to many others.

Once we had constructed the new knowledge that our experience had value, that the characteristic attributes that generally distinguish the practice of school leadership by most women from that of both men are five: caring, vision, intuition, collaboration, and courage, we set about testing our new

understanding by looking backwards over our careers to date. By now the date is late 1980's, and we have all been practicing administrators for a dozen years or more. Our first thought was to ask individuals to write about their careers using the five attributes as descriptors, but, after a year, that approach produced only two essays. However, as Gwen has described to you, folding clothes led to the Writers' Conference last January. Seven of us managed to eke out the time from our busy lives to attend the conference. Once we were together again, more systematically and rapidly than we dared hope, we found ourselves constructing knowledge once again. In this short time, we can only provide a few examples of how application of feminist attributes brings coherence and clarity to our practice.

About mid-way through the second morning, we all experienced a tumultuous moment of joy and insight as we saw that each of us was literally touching her heart. We had been talking for a day and a half about some inner gyroscope that had guided each of us at critical moments in our careers, and unconsciously, but so powerfully we had arrived together at a gesture which symbolized our emerging understanding of the origin of our career choices. We laughed and cried, and joked that while men around us may have gut feelings, we have heart felt feelings. We exulted in the realization that we had learned yet once again from our intuitions. We are no longer surprised when this happens, but we are always joyful when it happens.

Next began the analytical work of finding language with which to articulate what we had just experienced. That work led us back to themes from the previous day, and from other times together.

Nothing about the work of analysis is linear; the connections we make to previous experience, conversation, and analysis occur seemingly randomly. No doubt this quality of our work of constructing knowledge leads us to find conversation a more congenial medium in the early stages of creating new understanding; it's always possible when speaking to say, oh, that reminds me of what we said yesterday about... Text, on the other hand, demands linear sequence; when writing this paper, I was forced to make decisions about what I should describe first, then second, and so on. The transition from the fluidity of conversation where random access to any idea is always possible, to the prescribed sequence of text is difficult, but essential, because the precision writing requires clarifies our meaning further, and makes it accessible to others like yourselves.

At the outset of our conference, we had talked about rules. Cindy noted that men seem to have two different rule books, one to guide their conduct in the public sphere, and one to guide their conduct in the private sphere. Women, who have been historically confined to the private sphere only, grow into adulthood with only one set of rules, that set which guides life below the fault according to the values of care and collaboration. As we have moved into the public sphere over the last twenty years, we have taken our rule books with us, initially quite ignorant that 1) there is another set of rules operating in that arena, and 2) that we are carrying our indigenous rule book with us into the public sphere.

As we did, many women newly arrived in the public sphere, initially mimic the new set of rules they see around them. Many of

us, those who call ourselves feminists for sure, return to our original set of rules, and begin experimenting with the application of the values of the world below the fault in our new arena above the fault. Since this is a new set of rules never before tried out extensively in the public sphere, the potential effect could be transformational. This, we believe is the compelling reason why our knowledge constructed from women's experience must be disseminated.

The thread of this point led three of us to note that their earliest visions of their lives consisted of them having a life different from the external norms around them. Susan then suggested that this is different from many men, whose visions of their adult lives are externally defined. Jo fleshed out that idea, saying that an external vision is really a professional identity such as doctor, businessman or whatever. Susan then said that professional identity shapes the rulebook for conduct in that chosen professional arena, which is a fundamentally different approach from that taken by women whose rulebook for right conduct in life has been forged below the fault amid values of care and collaboration. The specific outlet in the public arena through which particular women express that set of values is entirely secondary, and almost irrelevant. The key idea, symbolized by the gesture of touching our hearts, is that we have embedded deep within us a set of rules for moral conduct which shapes our practice in the public arena of schools as contrasted to many men who seem to learn from the role itself what the rulebook is.

The identification of deeply held values as role shaping was our most profound discovery of our two days, but far from the only new understanding we created during that time together. We kept recognizing example after example of how our practice is shaped by the five attributes of feminist leadership. As one illustration, I will briefly tell the story of one of us, a superintendent who had formed a study group for the purpose of recommending a plan for high school re-organization.

Carol described how many people in her district questioned her sharply about her plan for the high school reorganization. She responded that she did not have a plan for the reorganization, and that if she did, there would be no need for the study group. Rather she genuinely expected to learn from the work of the study group. She cited this continuous pressure on her to produce a plan single-handedly as an example of how others who have a different conception of leadership, where the leader is the answer person sitting atop the pyramid all-knowing and all-wise, will try to force you to behave as they conceive you should. Only because of her fundamental belief in the value of collaboration was she able to resist being pressured to act without the benefit of the wisdom and experience of others. Carol not only resisted the pressure to act unilaterally, but she explained why she resisted, thereby educating others to her vision of leadership and helping them to redefine their own vision of leadership. Carol added that initially as a school leader she used to articulate only her structural sense of how a project should go, but now she goes right after the feelings, thereby honoring intuition and inviting others to do the same.

At this Writers' (Conversers'?) Conference, we arrived at a new destination unlike others we had discovered before. This time, not only did we name the new knowledge, but we also named the epistemological process by which we had constructed the new knowledge. With amazement, and amazement at our amazement, we realized that our conversation is a creative act. By speaking to one another, we create understanding which we then bring back into the active arenas of our lives. For seventeen years, we have been participants in a cycle of collaborative reflection leading to the construction of understanding leading in turn to praxis which in turn creates the experience which informs another cycle of reflection and so on.

As our analysis of our experiences was proceeding, I kept reading. I discovered, by accident as usual, that we were not the first group of women to come together and discover the value of women's experience. In fact, we stand in a long line of feminist groups extending back to the seventeenth century with the Bluestockings and extending into the twentieth century with the Six Point Group. Why didn't we know?, I wanted to know. Why hadn't we learned about the many women before us who have interpreted various aspects of culture through the lens of women's experience of the world? Why did we stumble around for years feeling like we had gauze over our eyes. and cotton wads in our ears and mouths before we discovered, mostly by accident, that our experience is valuable and conveying it to others is a project worth undertaking?

As with our discovery that other women before us had constructed knowledge out of women's experience, so too we have

learned that other women educators are constructing knowledge using an epistemological process similar to our own. As we asked about the product of analysis of women's experience, so too we ask about the process of constructing knowledge from women's experience, why didn't we know? Why hadn't we learned somewhere, so much earlier in our careers, that we have a valuable tool at hand, ready and waiting to be applied to the seemingly intractable problems facing us in schools? We have been living examples of feminist praxis of this sort for fifteen years, but we have only understood it as an epistemological stance for about ten months. And as with knowledge itself, it's only after naming the process that we are empowered to use it consciously in our work. Why did it take fifteen years to get to this place?

As another of our accidental discoveries along this journey, we have discovered a plausible answer to these questions. In reading Dale Spender's Women of Ideas and What Men Have Done to Them, (which, not insignificantly, I had bought at a NECEL book fair), we came across another of those concepts, like McIntosh's faulted pyramid, which brings understanding. Spender's thesis is that patriarchy operates deliberately to discredit and/or destroy women's ideas as an essential strategy for keeping the pyramid intact. McIntosh in her paper White Privilege, makes the same point. Those who occupy the upper reaches of the pyramid, on the face of it anyway, have much to lose if our world is transformed into a double helix. Who would want to lose entitlement to money, power or prestige? It's understandable (and intolerable) that those with

privilege would oppress and silence those announcing that such privilege is NOT the natural order of things.

We argue that the world of the faulted pyramid is crumbling around our ears. Our resolve to disseminate our understanding of the contribution of women to school leadership is rooted in our understanding that the contributions of generations of women before us who also discovered that knowledge is contained in women's experience has been destroyed and lost. We believe that the price for losing this understanding yet again is even higher in our generation than it has been in preceding generations. For example, even if we restrict our analysis to schools, we know that schools as they are currently constituted in the hierarchical model, reproducing existing divisions of gender, race and class, are failing dismally to educate many children for productive lives in the twentieth century. What good is a position atop a pyramid which is falling over? This notion gives us hope that, unlike our foremothers, perhaps the feminist project of which our work is but one small part, this time will have lasting impact.

This leads us to our closing. The destinations of the journey to date have been articulation of the five attributes of feminist leadership: caring, vision, collaboration, courage, intuition, illustration of how these categories can be used to analyze and describe effective leadership practices, declaration that women's experience as school leaders has value and that knowledge constructed through it can and should be disseminated to all, that the historical pattern of the loss and suppression of knowledge constructed out of women's experience cannot be allowed to

continue, and finally, advocacy of feminist praxis as a powerful epistemological tool for perpetuating the cycle of constructing knowledge out of women's experience, applying it in the world, and using the experience gained in the world as the source of more knowledge. We believe that more of us need to encounter the knowledge created out of women's experience, and the resulting learning curve needs to take on a much steeper slope for the benefit of us all, women and men together. What do you think?

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